# casual connect

Summer 2015

Audience Network

# Monetize Your App with 2 Million Advertisers From Facebook

With powerful people-based targeting and custom native ad formats, we make it easy for you to show your audience relevant ads while maximizing ad revenue.

Ready to Get Started? Head to: FB.me/Audience-Network

# Contents

3 **Letter from the Director**
4 **Contributors**
5 **About the Cover**

## COLUMNS

6 **NEW & NOTABLE**
**Not Such a Harebrained Scheme After All**
The Unusual Case of Mitch Gitelman

10 **POSTMORTEM**
**On the Level**
Talking PAC-MAN with Ben Acevedo

14 **INDIE CORNER**
**Two Indie Success Stories**
Beating the Odds in St. Petersburg and Grenoble

18 **EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW**
**The Write Stuff**
Lee Sheldon on Game Writing

## FEATURES

*[platform]*
22 **Think Mobile Last**
**Getting Back to our Online Roots**
*by Derrick Morton*

*[globalization]*
24 **Four Keys to Success in Asia**
**Tips on Bringing your Game to the APAC Market**
*by James Gwertzman*

*[education]*
26 **In a Class of Its Own**
**How Classcraft Is Enhancing Education Dynamics**
*by Shawn Young*

*[media]*
32 **The Author Is In**
**Dan Jolley: Video Game Writer**
*by Alex Rampell*

*[globalization]*
34 **Eye on Africa**
**Understanding Africa's Growing Video Game Industry**

**PUBLISHER & EDITOR IN CHIEF**
Jessica Tams

**EDITORS**
Peter Watkins, Nicholas Yanes

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR & DESIGNER**
Shirin Ardakani

**CONTRIBUTORS**
Cherie Liu, David Kern, Russ Phillips, Oliver Clarke, Rob Grossberg, Jan Wagner

**CONTACT US**
**Advertising Sales:**
Lea Marie Hester, *lea@casualconnect.org*
**Address Changes and Subscription:**
Julie Fridal, *julie@casualconnect.org*
**Article Submission and Comments:**
*editor@casualconnect.org*

**TRADEMARKS**
©2015 Casual Games Association. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or part of this magazine is strictly prohibited. Casual Games Association, Casual Connect, the Casual Games Association logo and the Casual Connect logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Casual Games Association. All other product and company names mentioned herein may be trademarks of their respective owners.

**DISCLOSURES**
The Casual Games Association's ("CGA") Casual Connect Magazine ("Magazine") is for informational purposes only. The Magazine contains current opinions and estimates which may change at any time. Furthermore, the CGA does not warrant or guarantee statements made by authors of articles in the Magazine. Information in the Magazine should not be used as the sole basis for any investment or strategy decisions. While the information included in the Magazine is derived from reliable sources, the reader is responsible for verification of information enclosed in this Magazine and the CGA does not guarantee or warrant the accuracy or completeness of the information. The CGA is not responsible for oversights in opinions or data.

Because of the position of the CGA in the casual games community, nearly all companies listed in this Magazine have contributed funds or services to the CGA in exchange for educational, promotional and marketing services.

**USAGE**
Companies inside of the entertainment business may use information in this magazine for internal purposes and with partners and/or potential partners. Members of the press may quote the Magazine.

Casual Connect Magazine *(http://casualconnect.org)* is published three times yearly by the Casual Games Association *(http://www.casualgamesassociation.org/),* P.O. Box 305 Smithfield, UT 84335. Casual Connect Magazine is postal mailed to over 17,000 game industry professionals and members of the press.

# EVENT CALENDAR

**19-21 October 2015**
**Casual Connect Tel Aviv**

Habima Square
Rothschild Boulevard
Tel Aviv, Israel

**16-18 February 2016**
**Casual Connect Europe**

Beurs van Berlage
Damrak 243
1012 ZJ, Amsterdam
Netherlands

**17-19 May 2016**
**Casual Connect Asia in Singapore**

Hard Rock
Resort World Sentosa
Singapore

**18-20 July 2016**
**Casual Connect USA in San Francisco**

San Francisco
Marriott Marquis
780 Mission Street
San Francisco, CA

# Letter from the Director

**Perhaps you've been there.**

You stop at the bar with a couple of co-workers or you find yourself sharing lukewarm fries with a colleague at a tradeshow somewhere. And after you've spent a few obligatory minutes complaining about how the middle has been sucked out of our industry (which it has) the conversation turns to More Important Matters. You talk about your personal challenges and frustrations, your dreams and aspirations. And if you're lucky, you come away with some pretty decent advice. For instance:

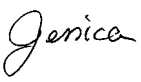
- "The most important thing in life is to smile at your children. I'm serious. You should read *A General Theory of Love* by Thomas Lewis. Tonight, if not sooner."
- "Multi-tasking is a myth. You simply cannot do more than one thing at a time. No one ever did a great job of two things at once. It's not possible. Focus."
- "It is hard to remove yourself from the emotion of sunk cost. But you have to. If you want to be successful, always think of your future from this moment forward. The past doesn't matter."
- "I missed meetings and handed off everything to be with my wife when she was pregnant. It was one of the best decisions I ever made."
- "The first million is the hardest for an entrepreneur. So until you've reached that milestone, it's the only milestone you should worry about."
- "I wasn't sure about kids. But once my oldest turned two, it's been amazing. We are having another soon, and I can't wait."

These nuggets all come from actual conversations I have had over actual French fries (or their equivalent)—conversations with the founders of some of the biggest companies in our industry. And it's telling that so much of the advice they have offered me has almost nothing to do with the mega-companies they created. Given a little time to reflect, they skip right past trivial day-to-day frustrations and zero in on things that will really make a difference over the long run. Relationships. Family. Perspective.

Which isn't to say that the challenge of making a living these days is insignificant. In this era when content creators can no longer rely on one-stop publishing, when success or failure seems predicated as much on luck as on hard work and ingenuity, it's helpful—for both survival and sanity—to pause from time to time and look at the bigger picture.

So that's my challenge to you. If not today then this week some time, pause from what you're doing and talk about the More Important Matters. I'll even go so far as to get the conversation started for you:

*"You gonna finish those fries?"*



Jessica Tams,
*Director of the Casual Games Association*
***jessica@casualconnect.org***

# Contributors

**Derrick Morton**
***derrick.morton@casualconnect.org***
A 20-year veteran of the casual gaming industry, Derrick has led the development of over 200 digital entertainment projects during his career. FlowPlay, the studio he founded in 2006, is the developer behind the social casino MMO, *Vegas World* (VegasWorld.com) which has acquired more than 600 million active users since its 2013 launch.
**Seattle, WA**

**James Gwertzman**
***james.gwertzman@casualconnect.org***
James has spent his career at the intersection of technology, business and the arts, with more than 15 years of executive experience in the computer game industry. He's currently CEO and founder of PlayFab, which provides cross-platform backend tools to help developers keep live games running smoothly.
**Seattle, WA**

**Mitch Gitelman**
***mitch.gitelman@casualconnect.org***
Mitch started in the paper RPG business, but moved to games in 1995. With now-Harebrained Schemes CEO Jordan Weisman, he co-created Crimson Skies and MechCommander while at FASA Interactive. Tapping into their tabletop roots, they've developed Kickstarter smash-hit games in the Shadowrun universe.
**Kirkland, WA**

**Shawn Young**
***shawn.young@casualconnect.org***
High school physics teacher Shawn Young saw an opportunity to revolutionize education when his students joked that they should be gaining experience points for in-class work. Shawn created Classcraft, an online platform that gamifies schoolwork with role-playing mechanics.
**Quebec, Canada**

**Casual Connect Europe**
Amsterdam
*February 2016*

**Casual Connect USA**
San Francisco
*July 2016*

**Ben Acevedo**
***ben.acevedo@casualconnect.org***
Growing up in rural Montana, Ben would create pencil-and-paper games for his friends and family. Starting as a tester for EA, he would go on to join a small art development shop and start a few of his own companies before landing at BANDAI NAMCO, where he's worked with the Pac-Man IP.
**San Francisco, CA**

**Dan Jolley**
***dan.jolley@casualconnect.org***
Dan Jolley didn't set out to become a writer for video games, but his career writing novels and comic books eventually led him to interactive storytelling. His most recent credits include Techland's *Dying Light,* released earlier this year.
**Ringgold, GA**

**Lee Sheldon**
***lee.sheldon@casualconnect.org***
Lee's entertainment career began in television. After writing episodes for shows such as Charlie's Angels and Star Trek: TNG, Lee became interested in the games industry. Lee has written for Gameforge, Zynga, Harmonix and more. He teaches game writing at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.
**Troy, NY**

# About the Cover

**Aaron Jasinski**
***FlowPlay***

I imagine my painting as one piece of an two part puzzle. The puzzle is completed by the unique experience and perspective each person brings who views it. I think all great art says something about being human. Artist and audience work together to discover what that is being said. What we each gain from experiencing art is as unique as our personalities. My hope is that when you look at my paintings you will conjure up your own stories and surprising discoveries.

My family is one of the best things in my life. I get a lot of happiness, inspiration, and motivation to work comes from my love for them.

**About Aaron**

Aaron Jasinski's paintings have shown across the US, and internationally. He also illustrates children's books, album covers, and creates electronic music. Aaron grew up in in a family of musicians and the love of music is a major influence in his visual art.

**Casual Connect Tel Aviv**
Tel Aviv
***October 2015***

**Casual Connect Asia**
Singapore
***May 2016***

# Not Such a Harebrained Scheme After All

## The Unusual Case of Mitch Gitelman

**Although Harebrained Schemes** has been around only since 2011, it has already earned a reputation for making unique and high quality games. In its short history, this Seattle-based game studio has developed such a loyal fan base that when it turned to Kickstarter in January 2015 to try to raise $100,000, it received over a million dollars from fans to fund *Shadowrun: Hong Kong*. Clearly these guys are doing something right. So we asked Mitch Gitelman, the company's co-founder and studio manager, to share some insight into their success.

### A Blockbuster Beginning

If there's one thing we've learned over the years, it's that the world of video games will welcome anyone with ideas and the passion to see them through—regardless of background or academic training. Case in point: Mitch Gitelman.

After leaving Columbia College Chicago in 1987, Gitelman found himself with experience in theatre direction but no great sense of direction beyond that. In time, he went from dusting shelves at the local Blockbuster to managing development and training for the entire Midwest. Of course, that breadth of responsibility required a lot of travel, so Gitelman would pack up his Samsonite and his passion for games and hit the road. His travel case included an item you're unlikely to see in most carry-ons: a Mac Classic (the most portable computer at the time) that he used to write paper-and-pencil games along the way.

During this period, Gitelman would frequently talk to Ray Winninger about the growing video game industry. At the time Winninger was the head of R&D at a tabletop company called Mayfair Games, and Gitelman was writ-

His travel case included an item you're unlikely to see in most carry-ons: a Mac Classic (the most portable computer at the time) that he used to write paper-and-pencil games along the way.

ing tabletop games for him as a freelancer. When Winninger insisted that video games would become the next big form of entertainment. Gitelman agreed, and the two decided to buy a ticket to the Consumer Electronics Show in Chicago. Not to attend, mind you, but so that they could get their hands on the show's guidebook (which listed all of the 70 game companies presenting at CES). Although they didn't walk the show, they did mail to each of the 70 companies a tri-fold brochure promoting their abilities and experience. Of the 70, seven responded with an invitation to CES Las Vegas in 1993.

Through pure salesmanship, Gitelman and Winninger persuaded Sony Interactive Europe to allow them to write a treatment for a video game that Sony was developing for then unknown PlayStation system. The two spent the following weekend hammering out a thorough outline for the game, and in short order they found themselves working for Sony in Wales.

### Coming up with Harebrained Schemes

Still, it's one thing to talk your way into a job at Sony. And it's quite another to start your own studio. That sort of a decision doesn't come about overnight. After Sony, Gitelman went to work for Imagination Pilots, producing and designing children's educational games and live-action games based on movie properties. Eventually, Gitelman went to work at FASA Interactive which was co-founded by Jordan Weisman. One corporate merger later and Gitelman found himself working for Microsoft, where he eventually became one of the first studio managers at Microsoft Games Studios for Xbox. But like so many before him, as Gitelman climbed the ladder at Microsoft, he found himself dealing with VPs more and game development less.

Not bad, but also not enough for someone like Gitelman. He left Microsoft and ended up consulting with Bungie, where he was pitched the idea of making a game with Weisman. Given ten weeks to create a game from scratch, he and Weisman and their team managed to produce *Crimson: Steam Pirates* in twelve weeks. During one of the many late nights working on *Crimson: Steam Pirates,* Weisman and Gitelman decided it was time to start a studio of their own. And the idea was just crazy enough that Harebrained Schemes seemed like the perfect name.

Since then, the fledgling studio has flourished while remaining, in Gitelman's words, "fiercely independent." Unlike many studios that work to exploit a single genre, Harebrained Schemes "does what we want, when we want"—regardless of the niche. And thus they have produced a mobile steampunk pirate game *(Crimson: Steam Pirates),* a *Battlestar Galactica*-meets-*Air Control* mash-up *(Strikefleet),* and a hybrid game merging mobile with tabletop miniatures *(Golem Arcana).* In addition, *Necropolis*—a third-person action/*Rogue*-like game, is currently in development.

During one of the many late nights working on *Crimson: Steam Pirates,* Weisman and Gitelman decided it was time to start a studio of their own. And the idea was just crazy enough that Harebrained Schemes seemed like the perfect name.

And then there are the *Shadowrun* games. *Shadowrun,* which was originally introduced in 1989 as a tabletop role-playing game, was in part created by Weisman while he was at FASA Corp. Gitelman even produced a first-person shooter based on *Shadowrun* while running FASA Studio. Though the fan community did not love this version of *Shadowrun,* Gitelman and Weisman had a deep affection for this franchise, which ultimately inspired

# Not Such a Harebrained Scheme After All

them to make *Shadowrun Returns.* Funded by Kickstarter and released in 2013, *Shadowrun Returns* proved to be such a success that after an expansion to the game (*Shadowrun: Dragonfall,* which was later released as a standalone Director's Cut), Harebrained Schemes decided to keep a good thing going.

But they weren't looking to simply expand on previous work. They wanted to make a game that could stand on its own. "We didn't want to make it so that you have to buy something else in order to buy this," says Gitelman. "An expansion for a game gets X percent of your original audience because you have to own the first one to get the expansion. And in the video game market, that only gets you 15 to 30% of your original audience."

## Hong Kong Kickstarter

As with *Shadowrun Returns,* Harebrained Schemes turned to Kickstarter to co-fund *Shadowrun: Hong Kong.* Although they had originally committed to just a12-hour fundraising campaign, they felt that there were enough fans out there willing to offer support that they should see if the studio could collect more money to add new features and additional content. "I love Kickstarter," Gitelman says, "and I think it's wonderful because it gives everyone an opportunity to go after their passions and make cool things that publishers wouldn't normally take a risk on." Still, he worried that fans' appetite for video game fundraising on Kickstarter might be waning. By the studio's calculations, there were maybe only five games that earned over $350,000 in 2014. Still they decided to proceed with the hope that their fans would step up.

The good news: There was such a global interest in the *Shadowrun: Hong Kong* Kickstarter that Harebrained Schemes quickly

"I love Kickstarter," Gitelman says, "and I think it's wonderful because it gives everyone an opportunity to go after their passions and make cool things that publishers wouldn't normally take a risk on."

exceeded its fundraising target. The bad news: There were so many responses that Harebrained Schemes considered adding a third shift just to respond to all of the emails in a timely fashion.

That is, of course, one of the downsides to managing a Kickstarter campaign for such a popular title: It can quickly become a full-time job. "The last thing you do before you go to bed is check Kickstarter and respond to emails," Gitelman says, "and the first thing you do in the morning—before you even get out of bed—is check Kickstarter for messages." Which made Gitelman a very busy man. "A well-run Kickstarter is a project in and of itself," he says, "so while I was running pre-production on *Shadowrun: Hong Kong,* I was doing pre-production on the Kickstarter."

That effort paid off. Although Harebrained Schemes set out to raise $100,000, the campaign netted around $1.2 million. In Gitelman's view, that overwhelming response was due to three factors: credibility born of past success, dedication to consistent improvement, and a commitment to follow up on feedback from audiences. Put differently: That's $1.2 million worth of high expectations.

## Going Off Script

So what about that theatre training? Although it didn't lead to a career on Broadway, Gitelman is still proud of the education he received and sees it as invaluable to his success in the video game industry. For one thing, learning how to speak in public and manage entertainment projects gave him the confidence to pitch Sony and the experience needed to lead and motivate teams. "It's not a natural thing to speak to a room full of people," says Gitelman, "but to me it's like putting on pants."

And then there's this: "Directing a video game has a lot of parallels to directing a play," says Gitelman. "When you direct a play, you get a text and then you work with costume designers, lighting designers, and construction designers. Everyone thinks of it as just actors, but that's only part of it. There are real parallels in getting disparate types of people to work together. In video games there's no difference. Getting them to all work as a unit on a clearly defined vision while still collaborating with them. It's a one-to-one to me."

His training also affects the way that Gitelman attacks a development project. "When you are a theatre director or actor you analyze a text, you analyze a script, and you look for character motivation and try to visualize a text. It's the same thing we do here—especially on the *Shadowrun* games. We don't think of them as a series of missions; we think of them as a series of scenes with beginnings, middles, and ends."

Gitelman's has been a curious career indeed. Along the way, he has learned a number of lessons that seem particularly pertinent as the industry heads off into an uncertain future. For example, he's troubled by the collective tendency to chase the latest game fad, resulting in a glut of me-too games inspired by someone else's success. He says: "People are constantly running from platform to platform, from market to market, instead of focusing on audience, craft, and games that can translate to multiple devices."

That herd mentality should be encouraging to aspiring developers, however, because it suggests that the market remains primed for new ideas. "With all the free resources out there," he says, "there is no reason not to be making something all the time. The best way to learn something is through experimental learning; make things, show it to your friends, evolve it. Because it's great to show a potential employer: 'Look, I made these things and I think they're cool. Do you?'"

In short, Gitelman's advice to those who want to be game developers is this: "If you want to be a maker, then you better be making because someone else is." ❊

Postmortem

# On the Level

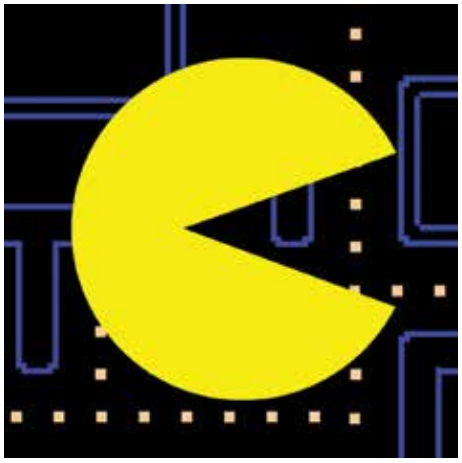
## Talking *PAC-MAN* with Ben Acevedo

**Since *PAC-MAN* was first released** in 1980, the game's namesake has become one of the most iconic video game characters of all time. As 2015 marks the 35th anniversary of the voracious chomper (yes, we are that old), Bandai Namco is celebrating with the release of new *PAC-MAN* games. The P-Man also gets a cameo in the upcoming film, *Pixels*.

Ben Acevedo, a Mobile Games Producer at Bandai Namco, offers an insider's perspective on the beloved franchise's evolution from 1980s icon to 2015 movie star.

### LEVEL 1
### Learning to Love Games

Like many in the gaming industry, Acevedo has loved playing video games since he was a child. He vividly remembers playing a rear projection shooter in which he had to gun down approaching aircraft. "It was pretty compelling at five or six years old," says Acevedo. "It was like being in a movie." He played all of the popular Atari games at the time—*PAC-MAN*, *Asteroids*, *Space Invaders*, and *Pitfall*—thanks to grandparents who were early adopters of technology. "The first game system I played was at their house," Acevedo says. "I have a fond memory of 'flipping the cartridge' repeatedly at their house over a summer."



Games have come a long way since then, of course, but Acevedo still enjoys playing the games of his youth, including the original *PAC-MAN*. "What I love about the game is that on the surface it looks easy. The rules are pretty straight forward, but in reality, it's a skilled challenge to just get past the first stage."

### LEVEL 2
### Getting into the Gaming Industry

Raised in the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Reservation by Arlee, Montana, a town located near the state's western border, Acevedo was in an area far removed from the arcades that dominated the video game industry in the '80s. In order to go to a real arcade or a store to buy games people would have to drive sixty miles to Missoula.

That remote upbringing didn't deter Acevedo from pursuing his love of gaming. Instead, the isolation motivated him to develop paper and pencil games for his friends and family—"my first introduction to game design," he calls it. Ultimately that passion brought him to San Francisco where he began his career in the video game industry as a tester on a *Tiger Woods* game for Electronic Arts. From EA he would go on to join a small art development shop and start a few of his own companies before finally landing at Bandai Namco.

> Growing up as a kid in small town Montana, I never would have imagined working on such an iconic game.

As that cryptic career summary might suggest, Acevedo's path to the present has taken a few detours and unexpected turns, with plenty of valuable lessons learned along the way. Chief among those lessons: *You will fail at some point in your career.* "Some of it may be on you, some may be out of your control, but you will fail, "Acevedo says. "The key is to find out what you did both right and wrong and what was out of your hands." The benefit of that sort of self-examination is that it helps

by Benjamin Acevedo;
*Mobile Games Producer, BANDAI NAMCO;*
**San Francisco, CA**

# Talking *PAC-MAN* with Ben Acevedo

a game developer come to recognize before it's too late when something is starting to go sideways.

Another key lesson: *Don't overcomplicate the scope.* "It sounds like common sense," Acevedo says, "but I see a lot of designs where the problem trying to be solved is overthought and you lose focus on what you are trying to fix."

## LEVEL 3
### Working on a Classic

When Acevedo joined Bandai Namco in early 2014, he quickly found that although Bandai was much larger than any of his startups, the spirit of the place felt very familiar. "I think all companies in their hearts want the same thing," Acevedo says. "You want to make the best game you can with the tools and materials you have."

And in Acevedo's case, that game is *PAC-MAN*. "Growing up as a kid in small town Montana, I never would have imagined working on such an iconic game," he says. He figures he has a sense of what J.J. Abrams must have felt as he began working on *Star Wars*. In both cases the challenge is to make a classic franchise relevant to modern consumers while retaining the heart of the original. "It's a challenge," he admits, "but you can't be afraid to try new things. We've completely redesigned the look of *PAC-MAN* on iOS. And we're going to continue to make changes to how our games look and how they interact with the players. It is a pretty exciting time on *PAC-MAN*. My goal is to make *PAC-MAN* exciting for players again. It's a challenge with a game that was designed 35 years ago when the current market is vastly different. How do you update it without breaking the nostalgia, and how do you keep the familiarity of the original without it becoming a museum piece?

"I think *PAC-MAN* is in a better place than when I started with the brand. We launched *PAC-MAN Friends*, which was simultaneously featured on Google Play and Apple's App store—a first for our mobile department. I redesigned the entire user flow and updated the user experience in the game, which hadn't been touched in four years. I brought hints, tips, improved controls and multiplayer for the first

time to *PAC-MAN* on iOS. On *Ms. PAC-MAN*, I created the first new mazes for that game since 1983 with the Breast Cancer awareness campaign we did last fall. Finally, I teamed up with Santa Cruz Skateboards and we created a maze that changed all the fruit and the ghosts to be branded with Santa Cruz's iconic art.

**It's a challenge with a game that was designed 35 years ago when the current market is vastly different. How do you update it without breaking the nostalgia, and how do you keep the familiarity of the original without it becoming a museum piece?**

"If I were to walk away from *PAC-MAN* today, I could honestly say I have done my best to enhance the game—and the reaction from fans and the ratings show it. We've gone from a 3-star game to a 4-star game. That's hard to do with as many players as we have."

## LEVEL 4
### Heading to Hollywood

*Pixels*, which is scheduled for release on July 24, 2015, is about aliens attacking Earth in form of video game characters from the 1980s. Adam Sandler, Kevin James, Josh Gad, and Peter Dinklage fight to save the planet from the likes of *Frogger*, *Q*bert*, and *PAC-MAN*. Acevedo's team was tasked with creating a game that was clearly based on the movie and paid homage to the original games. After circling around several ideas, they came back to the concept that best served the premise of the movie: a tower defense game.

That choice allowed the designers to use each classic video game as part of an ensemble piece—shining a spotlight on each of the game characters who are bent on destroying the city. Some unexpected good fortune helped along the way. During development, the team discovered a bug that ultimately became one of the game's standout features. "I think as you build games you should keep your eye open for brilliance hidden in discovery, " Acevedo says. "The challenge is how to keep this cool feature from breaking the overall game."

The convergence of games and film is one of the many reasons why Bandai Namco Games became Bandai Namco Entertainment. "This reflects my worldview of bringing great IP from film or television and combining it with great games to help each part build up the overall brand." That symbiosis between game and film can only occur when developers and filmmakers work together toward a common goal. Toward that end, Sony Pictures gave Acevedo's team access to film assets such as the script, art, sounds, and special effects. Consequently, the *Pixels* game becomes an extension of the movie. "The goal of this game is to create that extended experience of the film," Acevedo says—"to allow the player to be the hero and save the Earth"

## LEVEL 5
### Winning the Game

*Pixels* is Acevedo's fourth movie tie-in. "Every one is different," Acevedo says. "Every game and genre has its own rhythm." Even so, in spite of all of the pressure to make games that generate a lot of money by extending IP into another medium, the primary goal remains pretty much the same on every game. "Games should be fun," he says. "Otherwise, why play them?" ❇

Indie Corner

by Artem Merenfeld;
*Co-Founder, Aya Studios;*
**St. Petersburg, Russia**

# Two Indie Success Stories

## Beating the Odds in St. Petersburg and Grenoble

**We've grown accustomed to** reading about successful indie developers in these pages, but although these startups may start up in a garage somewhere, more often than not that garage is located in or near one of the development hotbeds around the world. But when was the last time you read about a thriving studio at the foot of the Alps or on the shores of the Gulf of Finland?

What we're saying is: Get a load of these guys….

– ed.

## Ignoring the Obstacles

**This is a story you may have heard** before: Two friends make lots of games for other people. The "make games" part they love, but the "for other people" part not so much. So they decide to venture out on their own.

Isn't that the standard indie developer backstory? Well, what makes this story less-than-standard is that it takes place in St. Petersburg, Russia. As you'll see.

### An Irresistible Pull

Launching a game studio in Russia isn't easy. For starters, the chances of making any profit in the local market are close to zero—so unless you're prepared to distribute your games internationally, you should keep your day job, as they say. That also means that to be successful you have to have the language skills to make connections and promote your games beyond Russian borders. In that sense, strong English-speaking skills are a must.

Then there's the problem of funding. While many Western brands and entertainment companies are willing to produce a video game to broaden awareness and reach, Russian companies are hyper-focused on short-term profits. They want to see a return on their investments within months, not years: six months to double their money is not an uncommon expectation. Consequently there are very few investors willing to take a chance on video games here.

In spite of all of those deterrents, the pull of independence proved too great for us to resist—especially once love entered the picture. My partner Yaroslav "Elegar" Rudakov wanted to create a game for his girlfriend—a *Stacker*-like game, but without tokens. In just a few days he created a JavaScript version he called *Tower of Babel*. When he shared it with me several years later, I offered to help improve the graphics—and our partnership was born.

By day we worked at Joybits and helped develop the game *Doodle God*, but late into the night we worked together on *The Tower*. Once we felt *The Tower* was ready to share

Launching a game studio in Russia isn't easy. For starters, the chances of making any profit in the local market are close to zero.

by Thomas Castel & Jérémie Francone;
*Co-Founders, 1Button Studio;*
**Grenoble, France**

# Jumping to the Top with Just One Button

**1Button Studio released *Mr. Jump*** in March, 2015. And by the end of the May it had already been downloaded over six million times. That's right. Six million. In less than three months. It's the type of success story that most game developers only dream of. And here we are living the dream.

Here's how it happened:

### First: Go to France

If you fly into Paris and drive south toward Grenoble, France, it will soon occur to you that you chose the wrong airport. Grenoble is set at the foot of the Alps in southeastern France, less than two hours from Geneva. Known more for its skiing than its game development, Grenoble nonetheless is a perfect enclave for an indie game studio like 1Button. Thanks to a thriving science and technology sector, the 2,000-year-old city has transformed itself into what some are calling "the French Silicon Valley."

We wanted keep the game-play and graphics as simple as possible, which led us to establish a top-down perspective; and we wanted an isometric game in the visual spirit of *Echochrome, Monument Valley*, and M.C. Escher.

with the world, we knew it was finally time to see if we could make a go of independence. So in August, 2014, we started Aya Studios.

### Going Indie

After turning *Tower of Babel* into *The Tower*, we quickly realized how popular casual games could be, and we were eager to get started on our next project. We had two priorities: We wanted keep the game-play and graphics as simple as possible, which led us to establish a top-down perspective; and we wanted an isometric game in the visual spirit of *Echochrome*, *Monument Valley*, and M.C. Escher. Those choices were sufficient to get the creative juices flowing, so within just a few weeks we had created a prototype for our next game—*Skyward*.

*Skyward* is a one-button game, which certainly checks the box for simple game-play. But since a game like that doesn't lend itself to detailed analytics, we had to build it without the benefit of data. So in order to get the game-play right we resorted to the next best alternative: playing the game tens of thousands of times. Once we found ourselves becoming addicted to our own game, we knew it would become a popular success.

Now with two games in-market and revenue coming in, we are turning our attention to next-level considerations like strengthening publisher relationships and generating additional revenue through in-game video ads. It seems—in spite of the obstacles—that our experiment in indie Russian game development is working.

# Two Indie Success Stories

The two of us developed an interest in game-making while still in college, and that interest transformed itself into a full-blown passion as we became part of Grenoble's tech community. We paid our dues, working for other companies while making apps in our spare time. But starting 1Button was inevitable. We didn't like to work for someone else. We always have ideas and projects, and we value our freedom.

We paid our dues, working for other companies while making apps in our spare time. But starting 1Button was inevitable. We didn't like to work for someone else.

The sort of freedom that allows you to specialize in iOS even when the rest of the world is telling you to diversify. For years we heard people saying that it was a mistake to focus on iOS, that Android would eventually become the main mobile OS—and they were all wrong. Apple's ecosystem is better for creativity, better for work in general. If you are really objective in your assessment of the games market you'll see that all true success stories—all truly innovative apps—are on iOS.

Including *Mr. Jump*.

### Then: Make the Jump

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Before Mr. Jump there was Mr. Flap, the eponymous star of 1Button's answer to *Flappy Bird*. We created *Mr. Flap* because we really liked the idea of having a character made only of polygons. That fascination with polygons wasn't satisfied by *Mr. Flap*, however. As our team

continued to experiment with polygonal characters, eventually Mr. Jump emerged. We just didn't quite know what to do with him.

We made several prototypes—including an endless runner—but we weren't happy with any of them. You see, we like simple concepts that feel like old-school games we played when we were children, but the prototypes did not live up to that standard. Worse yet, they were kind of boring—and we never release a game that we don't love and enjoy playing. It wouldn't be honest.

After putting the character on the backburner for a while, we realized that Mr. Jump would work best in a finite number of handmade levels—like a "simplified" *Mario*. Consequently, once the basic blueprint for Mr. Jump had been established, we focused on both playability and difficulty. We made the levels of *Mr. Jump* difficult enough so that we found them interesting.

When we were children we had to spend countless hours to complete a game, and it was great! That is no longer the case. In our view, these days games are too easy and linear. And we figured there were lots of people in the gamer community who missed the days of challenging, absorbing games. Turns out we were right.

*Mr. Jump* has the same appeal as *Flappy Bird*: The game is very hard so it becomes viral. People tell their friends on the social networks that the game is impossible (which it isn't) and those friends want to try to prove they can do it. Players often complain that the game is too hard, but at the same time they are really happy and proud when they finally manage to complete a level.

That's what a video game should feel like. A video game should bring a sense of accomplishment. The feedback we receive confirms that we were right about the choices we made with *Mr. Jump* and our other games. So we will continue on this path. ❊

# The ultimate in cost-effective player acquisition at scale

While the time and money users are spending on mobile games is surging, increased competition is putting pressure on game publishers to scale faster and wring more profit out of every player.

Fiksu's industry-leading mobile-first UA technology and extensive expertise provide exactly the solutions mobile game marketers need to bring in profitable users in huge numbers.

FIKSU®

Data-fueled mobile marketing

**US** 1.855.463.4578 | sales@fiksu.com
**EMEA** +44 208 434 7051 | sales-emea@fiksu.com
**APAC** +65 6372 9538 | sales-apac@fiksu.com

Exclusive Interview

# The Write Stuff

## Lee Sheldon on Game Writing

**Lee Sheldon's entertainment career largely began in the world of television. After** writing episodes for shows such as *Charlie's Angels, Star Trek: The Next Generation, Quincy, M.E.,* and *Cagney & Lacey,* Sheldon became interested in the growing video game industry. Since then, Sheldon has written for The Adventure Company's game series based on Agatha Christie novels, Harmonix's *Fantasia: Music Evolved,* Gameforge's *Star Trek: Infinite Space,* Zynga's *Adventure World,* and more.

The author of two books *(The Multiplayer Classroom: Designing Coursework as a Game* and *Character Development and Storytelling for Games)* Sheldon now teaches game writing as an associate professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He seemed like a guy who might have a few answers to our many questions. So we asked....

Q&A

**CASUAL CONNECT: When did you know that you wanted to be writer? Why did you decide to switch from writing for television shows to writing for video games?**

**LEE SHELDON:** I have been writing since I learned to read. I remember lying in bed (I don't know how old I was, probably in preschool) making up stories and songs. I switched from TV to games because I had written or re-written hundreds of episodes. I was bored, and I was only watching shows I was up for jobs on. I was playing games for fun. I saw fun there and a new challenge in interactivity. I believe in doing a job that is fun rather than one that isn't any longer.

**What are some of the elements of writing unique to video games?**

Interactivity. The audience is an active participant. Even more important: giving the player agency. The player needs to have the feeling she is affecting the world of the game. Another? Delivery. Games rely too heavily on the delivery mechanics of old media: cinematics and dialogue. There are many other ways of delivering story in games that spring from interactivity and agency.

Games rely too heavily on the delivery mechanics of old media: cinematics and dialogue. There are many other ways of delivering story in games that spring from interactivity and agency.

**From a business perspective, how do you think the video game industry differs from the television industry?**

Well, the television industry has been losing audience for years. Video games are gaining audience even faster now that the audience is becoming so diverse in terms of age, gender, race and culture. TV isn't going to disappear. Radio didn't disappear when TV arrived. Radio reinvented itself and is doing so again. TV is struggling to do the same.

**Television and movie writers are part of the Writer's Guild. In your opinion, why aren't there similar organizations in the gaming industry? Do you think there is a need for such a guild?**

As long as individual employees in the game industry are exploited as a matter of course, they are at risk. What the Writers Guild gives us is "safety in numbers." Nobody has to walk

alone. That said, the Writers Guild has been trying to gain a foothold in the games industry for many years without success. Mainly I think because it doesn't understand how the games industry is different. I think a guild rising from within the industry is a more reasonable bet at the moment.

**You use the phrase "branching tree of death" to describe bad video game writing and design. Could you define what this means and why you think people so frequently make this mistake?**

Much of game logic and dialogue logic is built on a tree structure. There are other structures that people seem unaware of after decades, but that's another issue. Basically in branching you start with a single line that then offers a choice. That means you have two potential lines to follow, depending on the choice the player made.

set generation, production time, and the hopelessly lost player to do it. Most think they've simply discovered a great new approach to game writing!

**You have not only worked on several video games, you have also improved several social media games. Why do you think there has been so little focus on story within social games?**

I've improved only games that want a robust story. Most social games don't care, or the developers think they can get away with making it up as they go along. If they want a story that is as engaging as the game-play, it requires work, craft and talent. But most social games are casual games played by players who have only a few minutes to play at a time. If a story is done badly, they will simply ignore it. Now more social games are trying story as a reason to continue playing. That's where I come in.

The Writers Guild has been trying to gain a foothold in the games industry for many years without success. Mainly I think because it doesn't understand how the games industry is different. I think a guild rising from within the industry is a more reasonable bet at the moment.

Those can each lead to another choice point. Now you have four possible plot or dialogue lines to address. People who know better bring the player back to the trunk of the tree as subtly as possible so the player still has some agency (true choices) along the way. Those who don't know better keep adding more choices, more branches until the whole thing becomes unproduceable and unplayable.

It's an egregious mistake, but I don't think it's made frequently in the mainstream industry. It shows up more frequently when someone who doesn't understand what it means to as-

**One of the many things you do is teach college students about video games. What attracted you to teaching?**

Two things: I've been lucky enough to be very successful in two different and difficult media. I wanted to give something back. The second is that I've been so disappointed with most writing in games. Despite improvements it still wallows in stereotypical characters and clichéd storylines. Family members of the player character have a tendency to die off in numbers far higher than the general population in order to give the player a reason to ride out

# Lee Sheldon on Game Writing

for revenge. Since many in the game industry think their stereotypes and clichés are just fine, I've decided to help train the generation that will take their jobs away from them.

I've improved only games that want a robust story. Most social games don't care, or the developers think they can get away with making it up as they go along. If they want a story that is as engaging as the gameplay, it requires work, craft and talent.

**Given the increasing number of people going to college to get into the video game industry and the increasing number of video game departments, what advice do you have for prospective students trying to choose which college to attend?**

Video games are an incredibly collaborative product. Game programs reflect that. It depends what the student wants to do. Programmers should look to programs that are centered in computer science. Artists should look at art schools that have moved into games. But that isn't enough. Look for a faculty that includes people who actually make games for a living. Look for a size of program that fits with the student. Big programs mean lots of collaboration. Smaller programs mean you and your work won't get lost in a crowd. There are many more things to look for. A student and parents looking at programs should do research. And they should not depend on the Princeton Rankings. There are quite a few issues with letting a private company make decisions for you.

**You teach college students about writing for video games and level design. What are some common misconceptions students have about making video games?**

They think it's easy. They think they can make a game up as they go along. They don't take scope into consideration. They are too used to waiting to the last minute to work on something. You cannot cram a game. (Cram is different from Crunch. Crunch can happen even when all these reasons don't exist, often due to outside pressures.) These are the four reasons why a lot of student games are never finished.

**Given the desire for stable employment, how do you prepare your students for the reality that the gaming industry is mainly one freelance project to another?**

The game industry is the state of most industry today. Rare are the opportunities to work for one company your entire life, settled in one community. Today's workforce must be agile. They need to be trained to flourish in today's work environment.

**What are some of the biggest changes you've noticed since you entered the gaming industry in the '90s? And on this point, what are some changes that you'd like to see?**

Despite what I said earlier, there *have* been improvements in the writing. But I'd still like to see companies hiring more professional game writers and then not forcing them to wallow in stereotypes and clichés. Other changes? The industry is even more fluid than it was before. It started out entrepreneurial with a few people making each game. Then we saw the big companies like EA, Activision, and Ubisoft emerge. Now, thanks to a number of great tools, smaller teams can again make games that reach huge audiences. Is this a permanent sea change? I doubt it. Life is cyclical. Business is cyclical. I hope it never reaches a steady state. Like sharks, if we stop swimming, we die. ❊

Beyond tracking and analytics,the one-stop marketing solution.

# F.O.X

FORCE OPERATION X

ios / android

unity

COCOS2DX

Corona SDK

No.1 smartphone marketing tool in Japanese app market.

https://cyber-z.co.jp/en/fox


Email : info@cyber-z-usa.com

US : 601 4th Street #214, San Francisco, CA, USA

Tokyo : 16F Shibuya Mark City West, 1-12-1
Dogenzaka, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, Japan

Korea : Seocho-daero 77gil-54, Seocho-gu, Seoul, Korea

Taiwan : 台北市內湖區瑞光路513巷26號6樓


CyberZ

# Think Mobile Last

## Getting Back to our Online Roots

**Ultimately, you only get one chance to get your game right on the small screen.**

**For small dev shops, the question of how to** compete against their AAA counterparts has always been a major pain-point. With the rise of mobile several years ago, a new avenue opened up for indie developers to compete for a significant share of the global games market. It was the community of small developers that really embraced and innovated on the platform, paving the way for today's $30 billion share of global game revenues. This rapid expansion has caused developers of all sizes to flock to mobile, and in turn it has created an industry-wide "mobile first" mentality.

But what was once a breeding ground for great games developed by small studios has since been overrun by the same AAA, multi-million-dollar budgets traditionally reserved for major console titles. Most notably, this year alone King and SuperCell will spend nearly $1 billion combined on to maintain their control of half of today's top grossing apps.

As casual game developers, we've come to an important crossroads—sitting at the intersection of expanding budgets, crowded marketplaces, and ballooning user acquisition costs. So in this new landscape, how do small developers compete?

While it's important not to lose sight of a solid cross-platform strategy, remaining hyper-focused on the small screen is no longer conducive to the indie model. Alternatively, we should look to the online and web-based environments that previously popularized social and casual games—and that today provide a better, faster, and more lucrative environment to develop on than mobile.

There are three key reasons why small studios should re-think the "mobile first" mentality, and instead consider a "mobile last" approach when developing casual games:

### 1. Barrier to Entry

Creating eye-catching UI on top of interesting gameplay experiences will always be imperative to the success of a game, but with increasingly crowded marketplaces, simply launching a game on mobile is no longer sufficient. Even as recently as a year ago, having a solid marketing and user acquisition strategy that allowed your game to crack the top 100 games on Google Play or the iOS App Store was enough to get you noticed. Today? More than 500 games launch on iOS *each day* with another 250 on Android. So cracking the top 20 has become all the more necessary in order to raise the visibility of your game enough to secure organic app downloads.

What's more, skyrocketing user acquisition costs—which have reached more than $3 per player—mean that launching your game can cost upwards of $100,000 per platform. In order to reach a majority of the mobile audience, you'll need to multiply that by two to launch across both Android and iOS.

Consequently, online still provides much more bang for your buck. Advertising and user acquisition costs continue to remain in check. Facebook, for example, provides a very cost-effective solution to run focused ads that reach key target audiences. Perhaps the greatest benefit of developing online games, however, is the ability to run effective web marketing campaigns. From keyword search and SEO campaigns

to greater access to a large number of popular distribution channels (such as Yahoo! Games and AOL's Games.com), marketing online games is much cheaper and has higher conversion-rates than the platform-specific campaigns required on mobile.

### 2. Room for Optimization

No game is perfectly balanced at launch. There are too many variables at play, and it's difficult to guess exactly how your audience is going to respond to your game—especially when it comes to monetization. Launching your game online first allows for testing within real-world environments over a longer period of time.

Having enough time to optimize a game is especially critical for mobile games, as successfully launching and beginning to cultivate a solid user base starting on Day One has gone from a desire to a necessity. As soon as you launch, the iTunes and Google Play promotion clock starts. Landing on a list highlighted by either app store can make or break your game. Notably, Apple has recently made significant changes to the way that users are served content through the "Featured" section on the App Store—deemphasizing algorithmically derived lists (including the "New Release" section) and focusing more on curated content as determined by Apple editors. For indie developers, this means that amassing a large number of players through user acquisition can no longer get a game automatically on the "Featured" section. Instead, the best way to capitalize on an App Store list is to ensure that a game is market-tested and optimized for monetization at launch.

Unlike mobile, where the day-of launch is arguably the most critical point in a games lifecycle, online games have longer-lead launches that don't truly start until user acquisition begins. Use this time online to test game-play mechanics and to ensure that players not only enjoy the game, but also are willing to pay for the experience. What you thought would resonate with players may not, or the concept may actually resonate better with a different, unexpected audience. After you've seen several hundred people play your game online, you'll have a much better sense of where the bottlenecks are and other important game balancing factors. Use online as your testing ground to iterate, innovate, and hone game-play before spending the time and money to launch on mobile. Ultimately, you only get one chance to get your game right on the small screen.

### 3. Cross-Platform is Easier than Ever

With the rise of game engines, taking your game from platform to platform has never been easier; meaning you don't have to completely start the development process over when looking to make the shift to mobile. Big-name engines like Unity and Unreal support the evolving need for a cross-platform development strategy—but for casual game developers, those might not be the easiest, or most cost-effective solutions. Many developers have in turn focused on developing natively, which requires separate code bases across iOS and Android.

by Derrick Morton;
*Founder, FlowPlay;*
**Seattle, Washington**

With so much of the industry rooted in Flash and web-based games, Adobe Air was the first engine to effectively address the gap in how to bring casual games to mobile. Starling took this a step further by allowing for lower CPU and RAM requirements, and it remains a great solution for web game developers. Recently another tool, Haxe, an open-source platform that compiles for web, Android, iOS, and even HTML5, has emerged as another great solution for Flash and web gaming professionals to build games for mobile.

Today, there are hundreds of options when it comes to what is right for your studio and the needs of your game from a development perspective. By utilizing an engine, or set of engines, that are conducive to development across mobile, tablet, and online environments, the door is left open to quickly and easily take a game to mobile once a strong enough audience and revenue base is built online.

Mobile isn't showing any signs of slowing down, with revenues expected to reach more than $44 billion by 2018 (Newzoo), and the platform continues to command major attention from game developers around the world. Ultimately, however, entering the online market is easier—and it can be done more quickly—leaving room to iterate on game-play while maintaining the safest funnel to mobile.

So remember: Next time you plan to launch a game, skirt the "mobile first" mentality and consider returning to our online roots with a "mobile last" approach. ❇

**While it's important not to lose sight of a solid cross-platform strategy, remaining hyper-focused on the small screen is no longer conducive to the indie model.**

# Four Keys to Success in Asia

## Tips on Bringing your Game to the APAC Market

**When I started PopCap Asia in 2008, people** thought it was crazy for a Western casual games company to try and expand into the region. Just seven years later, you'd be crazy *not* to try. This is true not just for bigger game companies like PopCap (now part of EA), but for small indie developers as well. Not only is China—by itself—about to be the biggest single game market in the world, but changes in game development and distribution have made Asia much more open to casual developers of all sizes.

**The indie scene is alive and well here, thanks to the same tools that have allowed Western developers to focus more on game-play and fun than on engines or backends.**

I saw this firsthand at Casual Connect Asia in Singapore this year, where the floor was crowded with developers showing off a huge range of games. The indie scene is alive and well here, thanks to the same tools that have allowed Western developers to focus more on game-play and fun than on engines or backends. While that means you'll be competing in Asia with homegrown developers, it also means there's a wealth of experience you can draw on.

Throughout my time here—whether at PopCap or at my own startup, PlayFab, I have been asked a lot about what makes a game successful in Asia. The short answer, of course, is the same thing that makes a game successful anywhere: a ton of planning and a little bit of luck. Beyond that, here are four key areas to focus on in your planning:

### Choose the Right Market

The Asia Pacific region is incredibly diverse—if you've thought about localization at all, you already know that. But it's not just language or platform you need to consider. Gaming culture is important too. China may be the biggest gaming market out there, but that doesn't mean your game is the right fit for Chinese players. Note that this isn't just a Western-to-Asia developer problem, of course; think of all the Asian games that have failed to make it in the U.S. or Europe.

It's also important to remember that "casual" is in the eye of the beholder. South Korea has such a competitive multiplayer gaming culture that casual games there look a lot more "hardcore" than casual games elsewhere. Similarly, while "casual games" and "free-to-play" are almost synonymous in the U.S. these days, Chinese players expect to have to pay to play (and win), and so casual games are much more heavily monetized there. RPGs and puzzle games remain popular in Japan, with monetization focused around "gotcha mechanics" that emphasize collecting. And don't forget the obvious cultural differences: Cricket is a national obsession in India, and accordingly cricket-themed video games are incredibly popular there.

Not sure where your game might do best? Spend some time looking at the top-selling games in the countries you're thinking of targeting. App Annie is useful for this, as you can set up dashboards that track very specific app types based on various combinations of platform, country and revenue model. It's important to look not just at the top games, however, as it's not exactly a surprise that *Clash of Clans* and *Candy Crush* are popular in many regions. Taking a look at the games that are ranked 20th through 100th will give you a much better picture of the popular trends.

Platform is important too, and it's not as simple as Android vs iOS. *Where* are people actually playing games? It's not a coincidence that eSports first

became a phenomenon in South Korea, where PC bangs had already created a massively social gaming experience. Long train commutes in Japan mean that mobile games are popular, but the legacy of feature phones means that smart phone platforms have only recently taken off—far later than they did in other countries that skipped the feature phone stage. Then there's India, which is seeing significant growth in mobile games, but much slower growth in players willing to pay for those games.

### Don't Forget about Android

Apple has been seeing huge growth in its iOS platform lately, particularly in China. But Android phones still dominate even there, with 72% of the market. Revenue comparisons are harder, but a recent report by Digi-Capital makes a compelling argument that Android revenue is usually underestimated. With Google Play nonexistent in China, the Android games market is divided among Baidu, Qihoo 360, Tencent, Wandoujia, and dozens of smaller distribution platforms. When added together with revenue from Google Play elsewhere, Android revenue platforms are actually greater than iOS revenue, according to this report.

That doesn't mean you can use the same strategies for the Android version of your game as for iOS. Apple devices are aimed at higher-end consumers, and so they are more likely to be purchased by people with more money to spend on games to begin with. So to get the same amount of revenue in China from Android, you'll need far more downloads than you would with Apple. Too much work? Let me remind you that China is set to overtake the U.S. as the biggest market in the world for games this year. By 2018, the Chinese market is expected to grow to $32.8 billion a year, according to Newzoo. That's $8 billion more than is predicted for the U.S.

One more thing to remember about Android devices is that because a main part of their appeal is their low cost, the majority of them are aimed at a less affluent audience. While Chinese companies such as Xiaomi and OnePlus compete at the higher end with top-of-the-line Samsung phones, super cheap phones such as those from Coolpad are increasingly popular. In addition to having fewer features, owners of these phones will be more sensitive to the cost of data downloads, which means you may need to adjust your game accordingly.

### Develop Strong Partnerships

Casual games have been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the democratization of game developer tools, and that applies to entering new markets as well. Just as you don't need a 10-person engine team anymore, you don't need to open your own office in Singapore. There are plenty of smart, reputable firms that can help you do great things, but you'll need to do your part as well.

It's not enough to pick up a distributor's card at a trade show and then email them six months later to tell them all about your new card game that you're sure everyone in Indonesia will love. You need to start thinking about your APAC strategy early and reach out to the right partners. In-person meetings are always best in building relationships, and if you plan ahead, you can arrange these for Casual Connect or GDC, rather than an expensive one-off trip.

Remember that it's not just localization you're looking for. Whether you're bringing your game to Indonesia or Korea, a good local partner will help you adjust your business model, handle local marketing, and make sure you have the right distribution relationships.

Not sure where to start? Start asking other game developers about their experiences and check out market-specific panels at trade shows. Make sure that the localization and distribution partners you're interested in actually have experience in the markets you're targeting, and always ask for references. If they can't give you the phone number or Skype ID of a current client, back away quickly.

### Use a Strong and Flexible Backend Solution

I realize that faced with so many markets and distribution channels, the idea of bringing your awesome casual game to APAC may now sound less appealing. But don't despair! This is where planning comes in. Include a flexible backend in your game from the start, and once you do find the right partners in the right market, they will be able to modify and operate your game far more easily and cheaply.

Don't have a backend team? Don't worry about it. Just as companies such as Unreal and Unity have put much more powerful engines in the hands of game developers, other companies (including my own, PlayFab) are making full-featured backend technology available at a fraction of the cost of doing it yourself. That means you can focus your localization resources where they can really make an impact, and significantly reduce the time and resources needed to enter new markets.

Casual games have never been more popular, and the resources to bring your game to the Asia Pacific market have never been more within the reach of ordinary developers. Take the time to find the right market and develop the right relationships and you dramatically increase the chances your game can succeed in the region, no matter where it was developed. ❊

by James Gwertzman;
*CEO, PlayFab;* **Seattle, WA**

**China is set to overtake the U.S. as the biggest market in the world for games this year. By 2018, the Chinese market is expected to grow to $32.8 billion a year, according to Newzoo. That's $8 billion more than is predicted for the U.S.**

# In a Class of Its Own

## How *Classcraft* Is Enhancing Education Dynamics

**I'm a high school physics teacher and a gamer.** So when my students joked that they should gain experience points for the work they do in class, I took them seriously. And I had the know-how to do what my students imagined—to build something different, something catered to them.

I've been a gamer all my life, and I recognized the merit of what games could do for education. I never took a game design class when I attended the University of Sherbrooke here in Canada, but I worked on gamification research projects, including one in which students acted as mayors and citizens to decide a development plan for green energy. As a web developer, I created small games for clients that led me further down the design path. One was a collective, crowd-sourced, mobile mosaic-making game for a winter carnival in my hometown of Sherbrooke, Quebec.

**Their progression in the game would be tied to their actions in class. If they disrupted class or forgot their homework, their characters would lose health points (HP). If they did well on an exam or helped their peers, they would gain experience points (XP).**

These efforts were about creating real experiences. They extended beyond the screen. Some of my favorite video games, like *Chrono Trigger* and *World of Warcraft,* involved team dynamics as well as deep character progression in which your decisions had ramifications. Games like *Metroid* and *Zelda* were about discovery; others, like *Fallout* and *Diablo,* focused on leveling up (and gaining lots of loot). If these experiences stayed with me, what was stopping them from providing that same value in other contexts?

### A Real-life MMO

*Classcraft* began as a prototype in my own 11th grade physics classroom. The game was simple enough that it could be played on paper, but I used my background in web development to computerize it. I made a simple, web-based platform (with no graphics and no student accounts) to keep track of the points for each player. It wasn't very streamlined. But like a massively multiplayer online game (MMO) on PC, my students would play as characters. As Warriors, Mages, and Healers, they would need to depend on each other and their unique powers to thrive.

Their progression in the game would be tied to their actions in class. If they disrupted class or forgot their homework, their characters would lose health points (HP). If they did well on an exam or helped their peers, they would gain experience points (XP). The more XP they gained, the more they would level up and learn powers that helped them in both contexts.

Students work in teams, and the teacher gives instant feedback. That's something gamers and students understand, and soft skills like collaboration and perseverance—accepting failure as a natural part of learning—carry over into college and the workplace. Students at young ages struggle with long-term goals, but short-term goals they get. They're familiar with fantasy settings like in *World of Warcraft* or *Harry Potter* or *Game of Thrones.* They identify with their avatars and feel powerful—like they can accomplish anything. In education, that kind of motivation and determination is imperative to drive meaningful learning.

Other educational games focus on the content, but kids grow out of that when they move on to the next grade or subject area. *Classcraft* stays with them. The classroom becomes the experience they're hooked on, and their teammates become their friends

by Shawn Young;
*Founder & CEO, Classcraft;*
**Quebec, Canada**

**I've been a gamer all my life, and I recognized the merit of what games could do for education.**

outside of class. The effect is much larger than the game itself.

That's why having students' feedback and input when shaping the game was important, and remains so. What would be motivating to them? Those motivators become powers in the game, like getting hints on tests or being able to leave class early. What consequences did they find fair if a student slacked off so much they lost all their health and fell in battle, hurting the entire team? Those became the sentences, like having to turn in an assignment early or going to detention.

Because students have a voice in the classroom, they feel more responsible for how they behave. A bad sentence is part of the game; it isn't the teacher's fault. They don't let the teacher down when they misstep; they upset their teammates. It creates a community that defies cliques and teacher-student barriers.

## From the Idea to the Game

Games are complex. The more complex they are, the more balancing and fine-tuning they require. *Classcraft* is no exception. You're dealing not only with game mechanics but also with an ecosystem of players, where everything in the game unfolds in real life.

One power, called Fountain of Mana, is an ability Mages can use to replenish teammates' action points, the energy that they need to use powers. Since it's collaborative, students gain XP for using it to help a classmate. It's hard to predict, but students are going to try to "game" the system however they can, and you have to account for that. Early in development, you could use Fountain of Mana on other Mages, which meant one student could use it on another Mage to gain XP. So two Mages would use the power back and forth, gaining XP infinitely and also replenishing their AP infinitely so that they could keep using the power. As I used the early versions of the game, there were many such "patches" that had to be applied to keep the game balanced and fair.

Every class situation is different, of course, which is why it's so important for teachers to have as much control over the game as they can. While some components of *Classcraft* are fixed (otherwise they'd break), the majority of it is customizable so that teachers can adjust as needed. What might work for one school or one group of students might not fly with another.

Not all classrooms embrace or can afford technology, either, so we made the game work with minimal technology requirements. *Classcraft* runs in your browser, so all you need is a single computer and a projector. For schools that are 1:1 (every student is assigned a computer or tablet) or BYOD (bring your own device), we've introduced mobile apps for iOS and Android so that teachers and students can make changes quickly and easily. Even now, the technology isn't the focus. You don't have to install the game, so teachers don't need to know about system requirements, and the role-playing game mechanics are basic. The learning curve is small so that teachers don't need to be tech- or gaming-savvy.

Surprisingly, we didn't encounter any problems getting administrators or even parents onboard. The results spoke for themselves: Kids like gaming, so they got excited about *Classcraft.* That spreads to the hallways, where other teachers hear about it and take notice. And when grades and participation go up, principals approve. My administrators were willing to let me experiment. They had confidence in what I was doing and in the benefits it would bring. And when parents see their child truly engaged and excited about school, they get behind it too.

## Entering the Education Space

Growing *Classcraft* into a business wasn't originally my intention. The game was born in my classroom, but the response to it was so overwhelmingly positive that I decided to take it online. My brother, Devin Young, and I used our skills in web development and design to make a scrappy, basic website to show the game. It got 130,000 views in one day, and the media started calling.

Today, our dad, Lauren, handles the financial end. He has 35 years of business experience, so he's qualified to steer us in the right direction. Determining a pricing model that works for all of our teachers has been a challenge, especially on a global scale. Some teachers have very few students while others manage hundreds. They all have different needs and different budgets, so it's tricky to find a middle ground. It's been imperative to us to provide a version of the game that we can offer for free so that teachers at smaller or low-income schools can still enjoy the benefits.

# REACH MASSIVE GLOBAL AUDIENCES ACROSS MULTIPLE PLATFORMS AND DEVICES

spilgames

WWW.SPILGAMES.COM

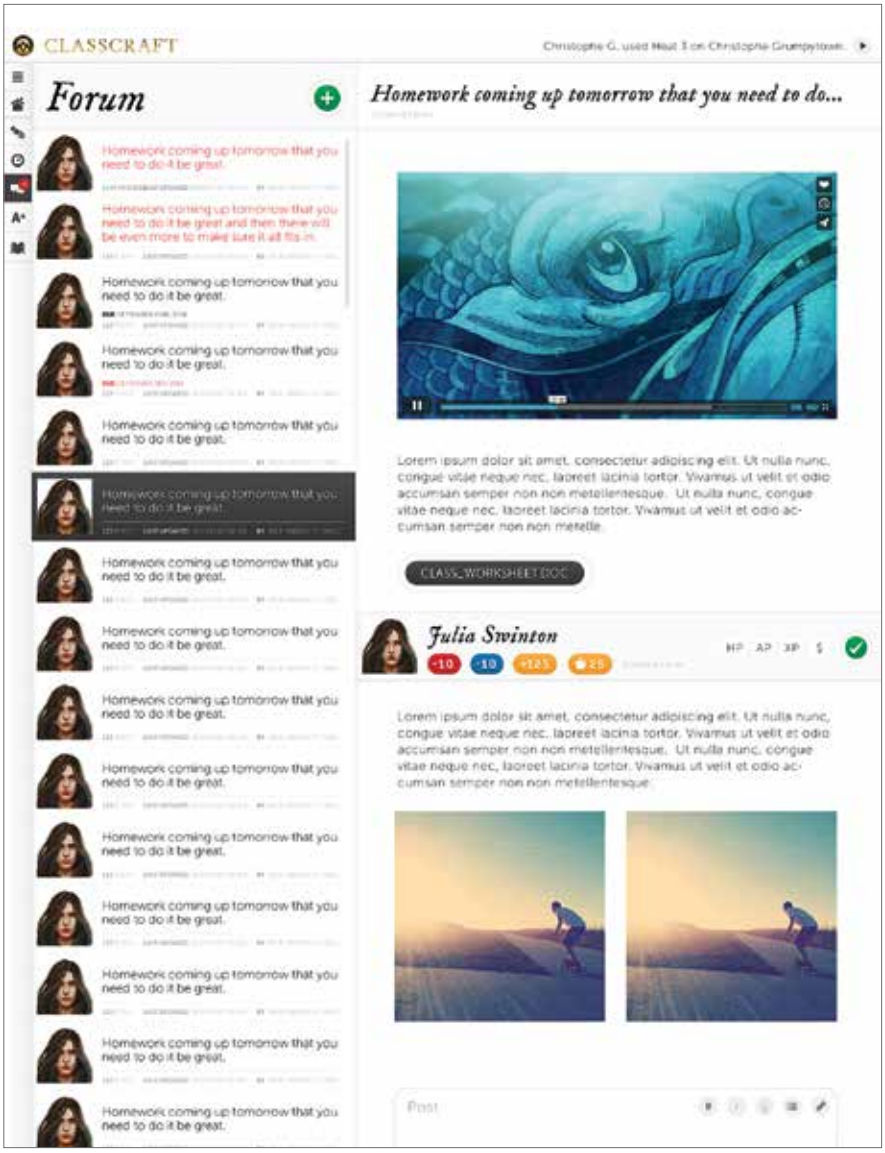
**Nearly 90% of teachers say that *Classcraft* has boosted the academic performance of their students.**

Devin has fashioned an incredible visual style for the game, which has made it more appealing to kids. It looks like a real video game—their avatars are as awesome as their characters in *League of Legends,* and we have illustrators with experience in the gaming industry who ensure the avatars become even cooler as students level up and unlock new gear and pets.

Devin's also been instrumental in getting the word out, and Stephanie Carmichael, our community and social media manager, has been key to making sure that community flourishes and is heard. Everyone's invested in where *Classcraft* is going, especially our developers, who have contributed so many amazing ideas and have been working on this project since Day One.

### Bigger Than We Imagined

The responses we've seen to *Classcraft* have been humbling. According to our survey of teachers playing for a year:



- 99% say the game has had a positive impact on their classroom atmospheres.
- 98% say the game has increased student engagement.
- 88% report an increase in academic performance.

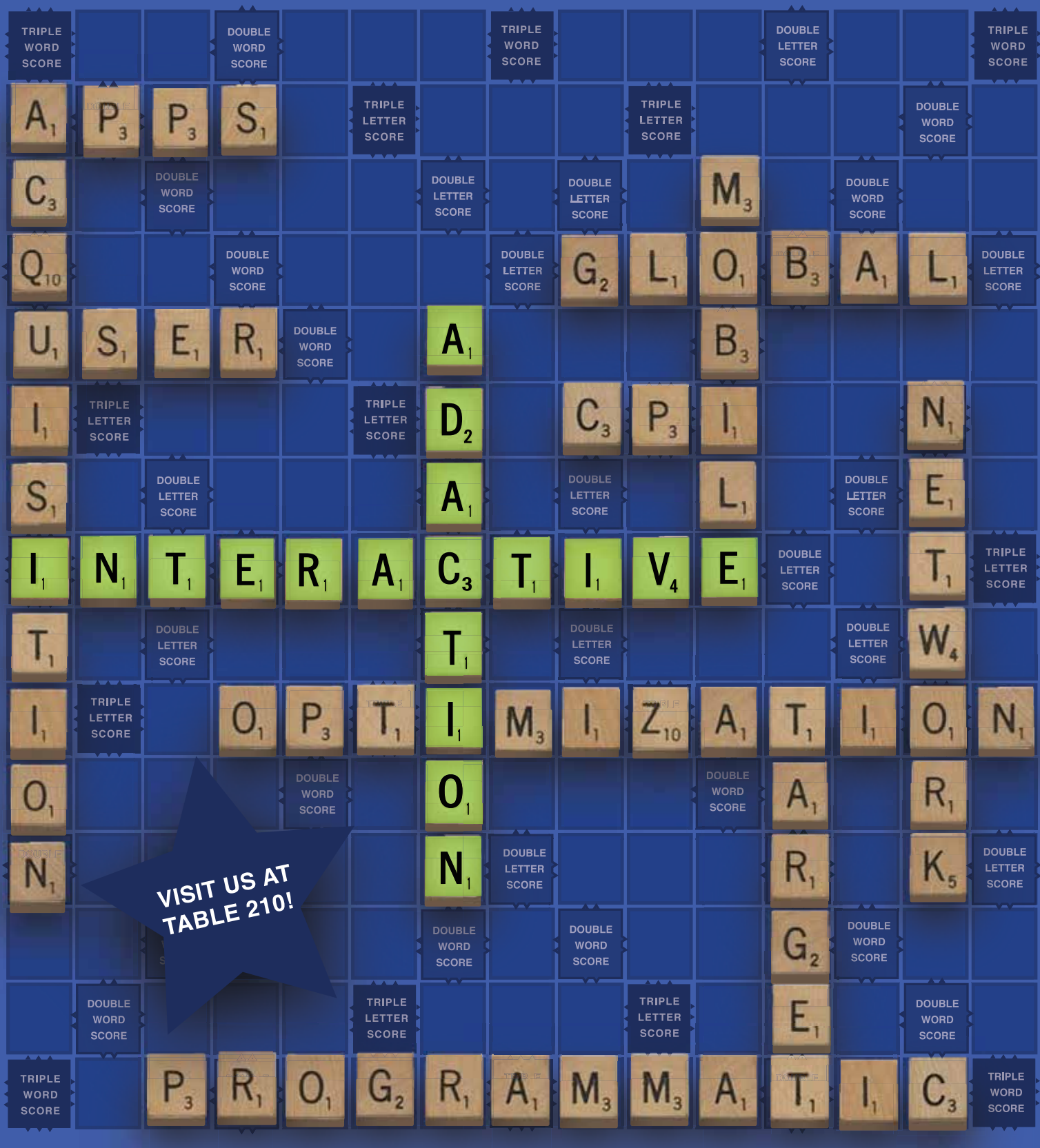
Plus, all of the teachers surveyed indicate that they're having more fun in class, which is as important for the burned out teacher as it is for the student who's sitting there bored. In high school, that was me.

We hear stories from teachers whose most difficult students now shine in class. They've told us how kids are helping each other, even with the little things. Singing in front of everyone can be a nerve-wracking experience, but it's one of our random events that kick off the day and make class exciting. Teammates band together so it's not scary anymore. Kids who are shy break out of their shells, bullying stops, and students with emotional or self-esteem issues find invaluable support networks and a reason to attend school. It's incredibly rewarding to know we're having such a huge impact on people's lives.

Both teachers and students are emotionally invested, and there's a rich world here. We plan to grow it, with upcoming features like a story mode, where students shape their own adventures. We also like to make the teacher's job as easy as possible, so we're giving them tools like instant polling, a learning management system to manage their lesson plans and collect homework, and different "quests" like timers and boss battles (aka quizzes).

For students, the game provides meaning. They love customizing their avatars and seeing themselves become more amazing every day. They love that the classroom becomes this fun, collaborative place. The risks and rewards are real for them.

But always, it's about education. So we listen to our community and ask for their feedback on everything we do. We want to know what's happening in the classroom so that our game can have as much impact on learning as possible. That's what makes *Classcraft* so effective. It embraces and supercharges what's already there. ❊




# Games Are Our Business.

AdAction Interactive

www.adaction.mobi

# The Author Is In

## Dan Jolley: Video Game Writer

**"Once they know how the game will function and what the game-play will be like, *then* they call in someone like me to bolt a story onto the existing material."**

**In 2014, *The Guardian* reported that over half** of traditionally-published authors and nearly 80% of independent writers make less than $1,000 a year. So clearly it isn't easy to make a living as a writer. But then there's Dan Jolley, who has found a way to work as a professional writer since the 1990s—first as an author of comic books and novels and later as a writer of video games. Assuming that he is making *more* than $1,000 a year, we asked Jolley to tell us a little bit about how he beat the odds and became a writer of video games.

### From Book Writer to Game Writer

Because of his extensive experience writing comic books for Marvel, DC Comics, and Image, Jolley was invited to be on a panel about comic books at Dragon Con in Atlanta. One of those who approached him at the conclusion of the session was Lee Hammock, the lead game designer of Icarus Studios' *Fallen Earth*. Seizing the opportunity to become part of a growth industry, Jolley talked his way into an interview and earned a place on the content team at Icarus.

That two-and-a-half-year stint at Icarus was invaluable. "The two-year mark is important in game development," says Jolley. "It's kind of like completing a probationary period." Having established his bona fides at Icarus, Jolley felt confident pursuing other options within the industry and ended up freelancing for Activision and Ubisoft.

### Life as a Freelancer

The decision to remain a perpetual free agent was an obvious one for Jolley because it allows him to live where he wants. Living in Georgia, near the Tennessee border, Jolley has been able to build a career for himself in an area distant from the centers of video game development. Most of his work can be done remotely, he says. "When I wrote and edited all the dialogue for *Transformers: War For Cybertron* and *Transformers: Fall Of Cybertron*, I never had to leave the house." On the other hand, while working on *Dying Light* for Techland, the studio had Jolley live in Poland for three months.

It can get complicated. Like most successful writers, Jolley depended on an agent before he became a game writer. Now he uses a manager instead. Though agents and managers have similar responsibilities an agent is more concerned with selling projects—such as individual books and screenplays—while "managers are more interested in selling *you*."

He cites the following example: "If I get a job offer, I can call up my manager and discuss it with him, and we'll talk about strategies and long-term goals and the best way to proceed. An agent would call and tell me I got a job offer, and if I asked him about whether or not he thought I should take it, he'd be likely to say, 'Why are you asking me this? Do you want it or not?'"

## Last-minute Collaboration

When he does get work, he's learned that the game's narrative is typically the one of the last pieces of the puzzle. "A game is entirely dependent on the technical abilities of the game engine and the staff of programmers that make it all happen," he says. "It doesn't always work this way, but most of the time the technical guys figure out what's possible, and then bring in the artists and designers who hash out the game-play, and once they know how the game will function and what the game-play will be like, *then* they call in someone like me to bolt a story onto the existing material."

**"As a writer, you don't get to say, 'This is the story I want to tell.' You have to take everyone's input into account and try to come up with a story that pleases every last one of them."**

Ringgold, GA

Of course, when you're brought in towards a game's completion, it means you're typically working during crunch time. Jolley tells of a particular game on which a last-minute change by executives forced him to rewrite the main story—in its entirety—over a nine-day period. "There was another one where a single important detail got changed, and I did a new draft of the main story to reflect that detail over the course of one long, sleepless night."

But such is the nature of game design. A game writer does not have the same control over narrative that a novelist enjoys. "When you're a freelance game writer, and you show up at the dev studio, *everyone is your boss*," says Jolley. "As a writer, you don't get to say, 'This is the story I want to tell.' You have to take everyone's input into account and try to come up with a story that pleases every last one of them." The challenge is further complicated by the need to tell a story while still allowing players to make meaningful choices along the way.

## Not Your Typical Zombie Game

When he was hired by Techland as one of the writers for *Dying Light*, an open-world horror survival game, Jolley knew he had to help the game stand apart from the myriad of other zombie games on the market. And it does.

Set in the quarantined city of Harran several months into a zombie uprising, *Dying Light* doesn't have the typical first-person shooter setup that many zombie games rely on. "The challenges to me weren't really about the zombies," says Jolley. "I was more concerned with how people in a horrible situation like this would act. It's a little weird to think about initially, but if you're a regular human stuck in a city overrun with zombies, and that's been going on for a while, well… you've still got to eat. You've still got to maintain some sort of shelter. That's part of being human—as a species, we can adapt to just about anything. So if you've got several hundred people trapped in this god-awful situation, they've got two choices: just lie down and die, or figure out how to keep going. And keeping going involves either setting up new kinds of makeshift societies, or becoming weird loner hermits, or preying on other people."

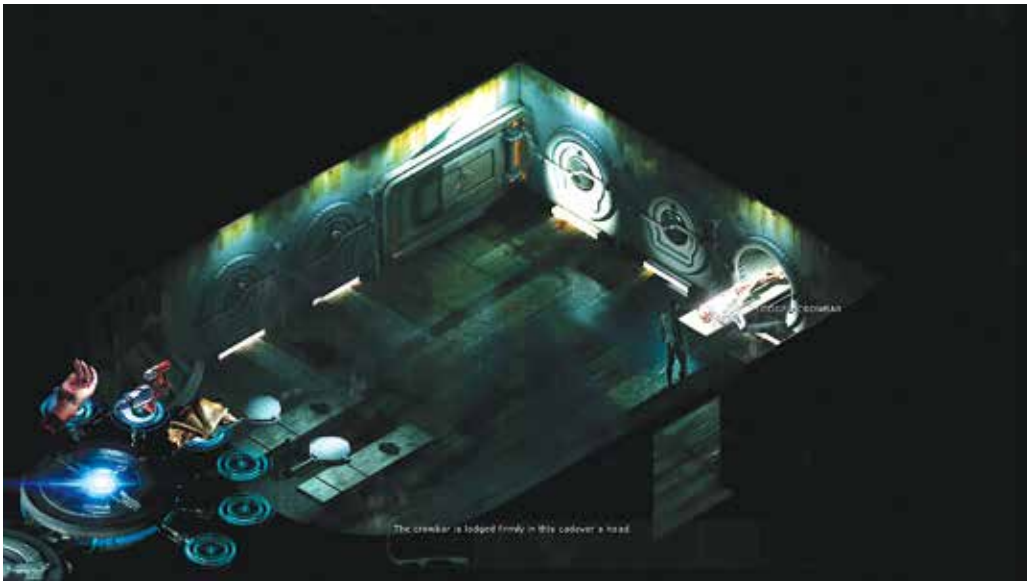
## Final Thoughts

So what advice does Jolley have for aspiring video game writers? First: *Always work on your writing.* "With the number of people wanting to be video game writers increasing every year, you have to stay sharp and practice your craft as much as possible." Second: *Learn to code.* "If you show up at a game company as an accomplished programmer who can also write skillfully," Jolley says, "your chances of getting a job drastically increase." ❊

# Eye on Africa

## Understanding Africa's Growing Video Game Industry

**If all you knew about Africa is what you had** learned on the evening news, you'd probably imagine it as a vast landscape filled with political unrest, disease, and displaced refugees. Thanks to news coverage centering on Ebola and Boko Haram, much of the world remains unaware of Africa's growing technological development. With a growing population of over 1.1 billion and some of the fastest growing economies in the world, Africa is a continent undergoing a transformation, which includes (not surprisingly) young Africans with mobile devices and disposable income—and emerging video game studios to cater to their needs.



"Africa is a massive place," says Nicholas Bischoff, co-founder of The Brotherhood, a South African indie game developer. "It is made up 58 Countries with a landmass three times the size of that of the United States. We have a continent with a population of over a billion people. The technological prowess of many of the developed countries is fast approaching the western world. We have cities and towns that would not be out of place in the States. That being said, Africa also has many problems that you would expect from 58 countries with a fairly tremulous history. South Africa is the most developed of the African states in terms of the engineering and technology sectors."

### An Economy in Transition

Historically, Africa's economy has been based largely on the extraction of raw goods from the continent for use in factories all over the globe. Still shaped by the economic infrastructures created during its colonial era, many African nations still rely on industries (such as farming and mining) fueled by cheap human labor, rather than on the more progressive industries associated with what Peter Drucker has referred to as the Knowledge Economy. Recent years, however, have seen this financial behavior change.

The impact of change has been remarkable. According to KPMG, "In the past ten years, African countries have experienced unprecedented growth rates, with seven of the top ten fastest growing economies in the world being those of key African countries this year" (KPMG Africa, "Africa's Top 10 Fastest Growing Economies," July 8, 2014).

The growth has touched many sectors and many countries. *The Economist* reports that "manufacturing output in the continent is expanding as quickly as the rest of the economy. Growth is even faster in services, which expanded at an average rate of 2.6% per person across Africa between 1996 and 2011. Tourism, in particular, has boomed: the number of foreign visitors doubled and receipts tripled between 2000 and 2012. Many countries, including Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique and Nigeria, have recently revised their estimates of GDP

by Nicholas Yanes
**Iowa City, IA**

to account for their growing non-resource sectors" ("African Economic Growth—The Twilight of the Resource Curse?" *The Economist,* January 15th, 2015). Nigeria and Kenya, in particular, are now among the fastest-growing economies in the world (Joshua Robinson, "The 20 Fastest-Growing Economies This Year," *Bloomberg Business,* Feb. 25, 2015).

Of course, as economies have expanded, so has consumption. One study reports that "mobile phone usage across Africa and the Middle East nearly doubled in 2013, and smartphones now make up more than 20% of all mobile phones being used.... There is an estimated 561million mobile phone users and that number will grow to 670.9 million by 2017" (Stephane Boyera and Aman Grewal, *Games in Africa: Opportunities & Challenges,* SBC4D, Feb. 12, 2014).

And where there are phones, there are games to be played. Little wonder then that Benedict Olumhense, the Founder and Executive Director of International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in Nigeria, has called Africa "the second market leader after Asia in the telecoms market, [with] leading countries of growth [being] Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, Kenya, and South Africa" (Bendict Olumhense, *The Current Condition and Prospects on African Game Market and Industry).*

**In the past ten years, African countries have experienced unprecedented growth rates, with seven of the top ten fastest growing economies in the world being those of key African countries this year.**

### Development Studios in Africa

As of May, 2015, the gamedevmap database listed video game studios in South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, and Egypt. In addition, there are studios not yet included in the database, including Kiro's Games in Cameroon and Kola Studios in Uganda. Ubisoft also operates a studio in Casablanca, Morocco.

Additionally, the International Game Developers Association has chapters in Cameroon, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Tunisia, and Senegal—more evidence that game development communities are growing throughout the continent. According to

Stephane Boyera, structure is allowing these communities to thrive, with hackathons and bootcamps now fueling the interest in game development.

Unfortunately, the fragmented nature of telecommunications in the region makes it difficult to get a clear sense of what types of games are being enjoyed by African consumers, it is apparent that console-based games will enjoy limited popularity due to lack of infrastructure in many parts of the continent. In many areas, mobile is the only option. As Olumhense, wrote, "Popular platforms in the region are browser-based and mobile games, with no participation yet in other platforms like social or console."

**Benedict Olumhense, the Founder and Executive Director of International Game Developers Association (IGDA) in Nigeria, has called Africa "the second market leader after Asia in the telecoms market, [with] leading countries of growth [being] Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, Kenya, and South Africa."**

Boyera agrees. "There is absolutely no evidence that PC and consoles can be a growing possible alternate option in the future," he says. "It seems quite clear that mobile will be the primary platform for gaming, like it is becoming the primary platform for listening to music, taking photos, etc. There are many reasons for that: the increased affordability of smartphones, the scarcity of electricity, etc. It is important to note that rural populations are still representing the biggest part of the population. Cost is still a major issue."

In spite of those constraints, the appetite for games—especially those relevant to the local market—is strong. Zubair Abubakar, the Co-Founded ChopUp—a Lagos, Nigeria-based game studio—started the company after participating in Nokia's Create for Millions competition. "We came third in West Africa with hundreds of thousands of downloads," says Abubakar. "This taught us that there was huge demand for not just mobile games but mobile games with local appeal. From then on we decided to focus and put our resources into building locally relevant games."

Many studios are finding success by appealing to African consumers through use of iconography and stories relevant to those in the continent. ChopUp frequently roots its games in Nigerian culture. "Our games are about culture and happenings around us, things that Nigerians and Africans can relate with," Abubakar said, "For example, *Danfo* (which means van) is a game about a day in life of a Danfo driver in Lagos. The player drives in the streets of Lagos and picks up passengers to earn money." Similarly, Evolution Game Studio included as much about Tunisia as possible in its first person shooter *World of Death,* including houses of cultural significance and food unique to that country.

### Challenges Ahead for African Gaming

A near universal aspect of the African gaming industry is its audience: young men. Abubakar says that ChopUp's typical consumer is an 18-year-old young adult in his first year of university, a guy with a smartphone and an appetite for games. "In general we are building games for African youths within the 15-to-35 age bracket," he says. Boyera and Grewal's

research found that women make up less than 25% of African gamers—compared to around 44% of all video game players in the United States.

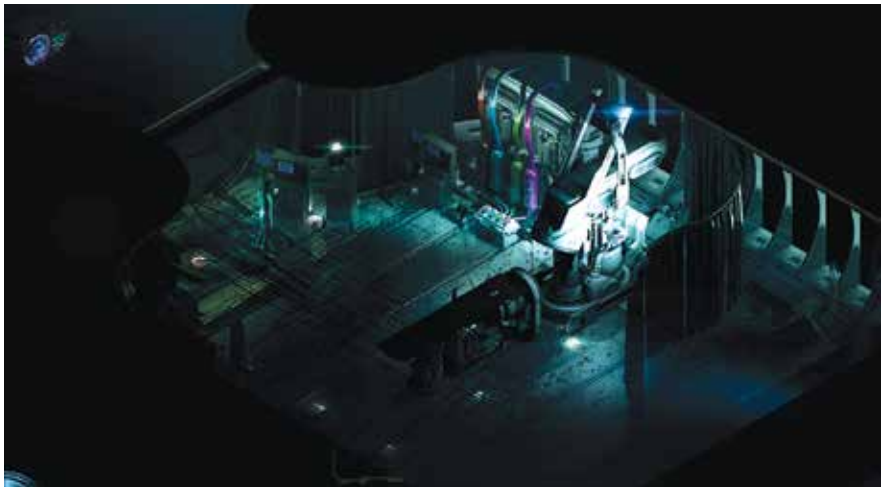
Abubakar speculates that that disparity is due primarily to culture and access. "It's culture in the sense that as they grow, females are told or trained to support their mothers with house chores and mostly don't have time to play games. So they see it more like a masculine thing especially when it comes to console games.… Males have a higher chance of getting access to games as it has always been seen as something for the boys. In fact if a typical parent was to gift his/her children with items, the boys are likely to get a game console while the girls get dresses/bags."

Bischoff, however, feels that the nation of South Africa distinctly differs from the rest of the continent on this issue. "Mobile games have a fairly massive penetration in the female market in South Africa," he says, adding that every woman he knows plays *Angry Birds* or a similar game for hours at a time.

A bigger challenge for sure is the inconsistent access to electricity in many parts of the region—a reality that hampers both the development and the consumption of games. Says Bishoff : "We often joke that *Stasis* is the first game produced by generator power."

Another barrier to entry is fast and reliable Internet access. Abubakar says that increased Internet penetration is needed in Africa for a native video game industry to thrive. "When Internet access becomes ubiquitous and cheap enough for an average African to afford, people will be much more eager to download games regardless of the size."

Even so, perhaps the greatest barrier facing the video game industry in Africa is economic infrastructure and trade. There are over three dozen currencies in Africa, most of which are unique to one country. That means that any online distributor of video games and similar apps will have to keep track of the shifting values of each currency on an ongoing basis. To further complicate matters, some nations in Africa are not able to use services such as PayPal to engage in commerce with the rest of the world—a significant hurdle for the many indie game studios across the world that rely on PayPal to send and receive money. For example, until last year PayPal refused to do business in Nigeria due to its association with advance fee fraud. "It was so bad," says Abubakar, "that if you registered a PayPal account overseas and then tried to use it in Nigeria, your account would most likely be blocked."



**Inconsistent access to electricity in many parts of the region hampers both the development and the consumption of games.**

### Conclusion

In summary: Africa is both ripe with opportunity and rife with challenges. Nevertheless, the potential for growth in the region cannot be overlooked. As infrastructure improves and access expands, there will be millions of young Africans hungry for games. The question is: Who will meet that demand? ❊

GamePoint is the developer of synchronous multiplayer games such as GamePoint Bingo, RoyalDice, WordTornado, CardParty and many more. Their hit title GamePoint Bingo has been going strong throughout the web and on Facebook Canvas for years, grasping the attention of millions of users in the process. The year 2015 marks the launch of a new product for GamePoint: GamePoint Slots. A true social Slots game!

GamePoint
www.gamepoint.com

**Multiplayer Social Games** **sales@gamepoint.com** **www.gamepoint.com**